



Canadian  
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droits de la personne

# **Creating a caregiver-friendly workplace**

A guide for federally regulated employers

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as represented by the Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2026.

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# Table of Contents

- Introduction..... 3
- About the Canadian Human Rights Act ..... 4
- A broad definition of family..... 5
- A broad definition of caregiving ..... 5
- Understanding the issues ..... 6
- Creating a caregiver-friendly workplace: Good practices ..... 7
- Accommodating caregiving needs — Know your role ..... 9

## Introduction

Picking a child up early from school because they are sick, taking a parent, grandparent or other family member to a medical appointment, or caring for a loved one with a disability are all part of family life. For the most part, people find ways to take care of both their work and family responsibilities. But sometimes it can be difficult.

The phrase “work-life balance” can be misleading. It suggests that a person’s employment is disconnected from their life. Balancing employment and life responsibilities can be difficult even in the best circumstances.

Employers have a legal responsibility to create a caregiver-friendly workplace. Creating a caregiver-friendly workplace not only benefits workers, it benefits employers too. It minimizes the cost of lost productivity, absenteeism, and staff turnover. It improves morale and productivity. The lived experience of caregiver-workers can be an asset to employers. Workers who have caregiving responsibilities but feel supported by their employer are more likely to enjoy better mental health and be more loyal and productive.

This guide provides tips for creating a caregiver-friendly workplace, as well as how to develop solutions that are in harmony with human rights law. It outlines the rights and responsibilities of the worker, the employer, unions and/or employee representatives.

This guide uses the term worker, instead of employee in order to use the broadest term possible. The term “worker,” means all full-time, part-time, casual, contract, permanent and temporary employees, including service employees in military and other public safety roles, as well as trainees/cadets, students, interns, volunteers, job applicants and candidates, and those on approved leave.

This guide also uses the phrase “caregiver-worker,” to describe someone who has both unpaid caregiving responsibilities and paid work.

Finally, this guide is not legal advice. Nothing in this guide limits the Commission’s discretion in accepting a workplace accommodation complaint, or referring such a complaint to the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal for further inquiry.

## About the Canadian Human Rights Act

The Canadian Human Rights Act is Canada's federal anti-discrimination law. Its purpose is to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to live the lives they are able and wish to have, free from discrimination. It applies to all federally regulated employers, such as:

- federal departments and agencies in the federal public service
- First Nations governments
- banks
- Crown Corporations, such as Canada Post
- radio and television broadcasting
- air or rail transportation

Under the Act, it is illegal in Canada to discriminate against someone for reasons linked to a set of certain personal traits. These traits are known as [prohibited grounds](#), and include things like your race, age or disability.

There are 13 prohibited grounds of discrimination under the Act:

- race
- national or ethnic origin
- colour
- religion
- age
- sex
- sexual orientation
- gender identity or expression
- marital status
- family status
- genetic characteristics
- disability
- conviction for which a pardon has been granted

A worker who feels they have been discriminated against based on one or more prohibited grounds of discrimination in the Act may choose to file a complaint with the Commission within one year of the last alleged act of discriminatory treatment.

Canada's courts have confirmed that providing care to a family member is covered under the protected ground of "family status." That means that employers have a legal obligation to accommodate a worker who has caregiving responsibilities during their work hours. This is called the employer's duty to accommodate. It requires

employers to take steps to adjust rules, policies or practices that have a negative impact on individuals, or groups of individuals based on prohibited grounds of discrimination.

For more information, refer to the Commission’s publication: [Workplace accommodation - A guide for federally regulated workplaces](#).

## **A broad definition of family**

One of the keys to creating a caregiving-friendly workplace is to use the broadest and most inclusive concept of a family. Our society’s definition of family has long-since evolved beyond the traditional nuclear family. It now includes families one is born into, as well as the multiple families one chooses over the course of their life.

A family can include members who may or may not live in the same household, or who may or may not be related by blood or law, including common-law. It includes relationships between parents and children, and with chosen spouses or partners (marital and common law), siblings, in-laws, uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces, cousins, grandparents, grandchildren.

Families can also include relationships not defined by blood or legal bonds. This may include “chosen families” such as strong friendships and close-knit communities. These types of relationships may be particularly important for Indigenous peoples, ethnocultural and/or immigrant communities, as well as 2SLGBTQI+<sup>1</sup> people.

## **A broad definition of caregiving**

Caregiving touches so many people in Canada, in so many ways. From raising children to supporting aging parents or loved ones with a long-term health condition, millions of Canadians will take on caregiving roles at some point in their lives, according to Statistics Canada.

Caregiving can involve caring for any of the family relations outlined in the section about the definition of family. Common examples of caregiving include:

- caring for a child
- caring for an elder
- supporting someone with a disability
- supporting someone who is recovering from an accident or a severe illness
- attending to someone’s needs at the end of life

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<sup>1</sup> 2SLGBTQI+ is an acronym for Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, trans, bisexual, queer and intersex. This includes people who identify as part of sexual and gender diverse communities who use additional terminologies.

## **Understanding the issues**

### **Caregiving roles are undervalued**

In many respects, unpaid caregivers are the backbone of health and social care systems in Canada. Among these caregivers are “sandwich caregivers.” These are people who are both caring for aging parents and supporting their own children. They face unique challenges that can make managing work and caregiving obligations particularly demanding.

Statistics Canada has confirmed that sandwich caregivers are predominantly women. Most caregivers who are employed work full-time, and 1 in 4 Canadians of employment age are caregivers. As Canada’s population ages, the number of people who will need to care for a family member is expected to climb.

### **Caregiving is a gender equality issue**

In Canada, caregiving remains a gender equality issue. Compared to men, women in Canada still provide more family-related care that often requires them to work part-time or give up hours of work from their full-time jobs. These challenges leave women with a higher overall workload and less time to rest. The result has a significant impact on their overall wellbeing.

Read more: [Family work: how family members support and provide for each other](#) - The Vanier Institute of the Family

Caregiving can also hinder career growth. This is because caregivers are often forced to take career breaks, such as long stints of unpaid family leave. They also often opt for flexible, lower-paying positions to manage caregiving, which can limit their opportunities for advancement, skill development, and networking. The financial impacts of these realities can affect a person's ability to maintain a decent standard of living. This disproportionately affects women from Indigenous, Black and other racialized communities. They may face additional barriers to fair compensation and career progression. These conditions add up and negatively affect women’s full and equal participation in a labour force that already does not pay them equally for work of equal value. This has long term impacts for women, even into retirement, because lower lifetime earnings lead to lower pensions. This reinforces a vicious cycle of undervaluing women and their contributions.

The undervaluing of caregiving also has an impact on professional caregivers (such as childcare and eldercare providers). Those in these caregiving professions, who are

predominantly women, often earn less than workers in other fields.

## **Other equality rights**

When caregiving is undervalued, it not only negatively impacts women. It also affects men and non-binary people who may also be disadvantaged if their caregiving roles are overlooked. For example, if the workplace policies assume caregiving is primarily a women's responsibility, this can become a barrier for men and non-binary people. It may even discourage them from requesting parental or caregiving leave or request flexible work arrangements.

The challenge of managing employment and unpaid caregiving responsibilities can also vary based on other characteristics such as marital status, sexual orientation, race, age, disability or gender identity. For example, single, divorced or separated parents with dual custody may face complex or strict childcare schedules.

It is also important for employers to be aware of the pressures on workers with caregiving responsibilities when developing psychological health and safety policies. Caregiver-workers are more likely to experience negative mental health outcomes because they have so many roles to fulfill.

When multiple factors like this converge, that is where unique forms of discrimination, known as intersectionality, can occur. This type of situation requires a nuanced response that will examine the various and compounding forms of exclusion and inequality.

## **Creating a caregiver-friendly workplace: Good practices**

Making working conditions more "livable" is a first step toward supporting the overall well-being of your workforce. For an employer, this is about fulfilling legal obligations to accommodate workers with caregiving responsibilities. It is also about providing flexible conditions and arrangements that support a person's ability to thrive in the workplace and at home.

Creating a caregiver-friendly workplace begins with support from senior leadership. This sets the tone for the organization's culture and practices around inclusion and workplace well-being. Senior leaders who encourage staff and management to openly discuss caregiving experiences are contributing to a culture of understanding and support around this issue.

The following are some good practices that will help build a caregiver-friendly culture:

- let workers know their well-being is important to you

- provide education and training to managers on how they can contribute to a caregiver-friendly workplace
- say in job postings how your workplace prioritizes well-being, including acknowledging that workers may also have caregiver responsibilities
- support the mental health of caregiver-workers with employee assistance programs, flexible scheduling, and effective accommodation policies
- ensure policies that support caregiver-workers are promoted, shared and easily accessed by all personnel
- offer flexible work arrangements that may facilitate caregiving, such as remote work, and/or benefits that offer respite care
- ensure that caregiver-workers, especially those taking extended or flexible leave, have equal access to career advancement, training, and leadership opportunities
- encourage and normalize caregiving leave and flexibility for people of all genders, including men

## **The value of flexible work arrangements**

By building flexibility into workplace accommodation policies and work arrangements, managers and supervisors will have stronger tools at their disposal. They will be better equipped to help their workers meet their family caregiving responsibilities while remaining fully productive members of the team.

Flexible work arrangements have also been shown to reduce absenteeism, foster worker loyalty, improve morale and retention, and increase productivity.

Some examples of flexible work arrangements include:

- different, or shifting start and end times
- a compressed schedule
- telework
- extended maternity or parental leave
- compassionate, discretionary, or other leave to care for sick family members
- leave to provide child or elder care in unanticipated or emergency situations
- shift changes
- job sharing
- part-time work
- shifting or sharing work duties or tasks

Of course, an employer's ability to offer flexible work arrangements will vary according to the type of industry and the nature of individual positions and job duties.

## **Accommodating caregiving needs — Know your role**

When a worker comes to their employer with a family caregiving issue, everyone involved has a responsibility to approach the issue in a respectful, collaborative and timely manner. Everyone has a responsibility to find solutions. The following are responsibilities specific to accommodating caregiving needs.

### **The worker should:**

- be able to describe their relationship to the person requiring their care
- be able to demonstrate that there is a caregiving obligation (e.g. child's age, custody order, child or elder with a disability)
- be able to provide the specifics of the care that the recipient needs (e.g. what is needed, why, how often, when)
- show that they have explored realistic alternative caregiving options (e.g. friends and family, day care, home care, community supports) and why these alternative care measures are not reasonably available
- be able to describe how long the person will need care (e.g. short term, long term, indefinite)

### **The employer should:**

- address each accommodation request on a case-by-case basis
- track accommodation requests centrally to help promote a clear, consistent, timely and fair approach across the organization
- ensure that policies and practices do not create barriers to accommodating the needs of caregiver-workers
- help management to understand the rights of caregiver-workers and the barriers they face in the workplace
- ensure managers are aware of the employer's legal obligations with respect to accommodating the needs of caregiver-workers
- where possible, demonstrate flexibility when meeting the caregiver-worker's needs

### **The union/employee representative should:**

- work to ensure that the needs of caregiver-workers are among the priorities of the union
- help the membership to understand the rights of caregiver-workers and the barriers they face in the workplace
- consider exceptions to union rules and terms of collective agreements where

they may be a barrier to accommodating the needs of caregiver-workers  
More guidance on workplace accommodation can be found in the Commission's  
publication: [Workplace accommodation - A guide for federally regulated workplaces](#)